



STATES OF CAMOUFLAGE

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Pierre Menard did not want to compose *another* Quixote, which surely is easy enough—he wanted to compose *the* Quixote. Nor, surely, need one be obliged to note that his goal was never a mechanical transcription of the original; he had no intention of *copying* it. His admirable ambition was to produce a number of pages which coincided—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote”

THE OPERATION

One day in the late fall of 2013, an ambulance with fire department logos was seen circulating in the streets of Puerto Iguazú, a town on Argentina’s northern border with Brazil and Paraguay. Residents noticed that the ambulance was of a different kind, unlike others that belonged to local hospitals. Though a freshly painted, red-lettered “BOMBEROS” (firefighters) sign decorated the front of the vehicle, unusual green markings in English—“fire rescue”—printed on its side doors betrayed its foreign origins. The ambulance was spotted parked near the customs office at the river port, on its way to or from Paraguay. Later, Iguazúenses told the police (and the media) that they recognized the former fire chief, Ramón “Yiyo” Moretti in the driver’s seat. He was no longer active as a firefighter, yet

that day he was wearing his official uniform. Those who saw Yiyo driving the ambulance suspected that something was awry.

After the vehicle left Iguazú, it made a turn onto National Route 12, heading south. The only asphalt road connecting the remote Triple Frontier to the rest of the country, Route 12 is a two-lane highway that stretches parallel to the Paraná River across the hilly jungle terrain of the Misiones Province. Memories of deadly accidents haunt the road. Misioneros had not yet forgotten how more than a year and a half earlier, a truck had crossed into the wrong lane and crashed into a tour bus traveling in the opposite direction, killing ten passengers and injuring dozens more. They also heard how not long ago a motorcyclist lost control of his bike, fell to the ground, and was fatally wounded when hit by an ambulance. The local media meticulously report deaths on the highway. Firefighters extricating mutilated bodies of victims, rescue vehicles blocking off the road, their emergency lights flashing, are captured in photographs and featured in news headlines. But that day the ambulance proceeded without attracting much attention.

A few miles south of Iguazú it passed a checkpoint controlled by the Argentine National Gendarmerie. With jurisdiction over strategic infrastructure, including borders and highways, gendarmes have patrolled the Triple Frontier for more than seventy years. They used to be stationed at the Tancredo Neves International Bridge across the Iguazú River connecting Argentina with Brazil—a major land corridor for trade between two countries of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), also used as a route for drug trafficking, human smuggling, and contraband originating in Paraguay. To this day residents claim that gendarmes on the bridge were easily bribed: in exchange for a share in the booty or for a fixed fee they allowed illegal flows to proceed uninterrupted. When in 2001, under pressure from the U.S. government, Argentina introduced reforms aimed at increasing security at the Triple Frontier, the control of the bridge was handed over to migrations and customs authorities. The gendarmes then retreated south, erecting a secondary checkpoint on the national highway. Here, at the only exit route from Iguazú, officers of the Thirteenth Squadron with service dogs trained to detect drugs stop vehicles leaving the border area. It is at this checkpoint that gendarmes often find bags of cocaine tucked under the seats of long-distance buses or packets of marijuana concealed in colorful schoolchildren's backpacks. Yet it is unlikely that they stopped the ambulance that Yiyo was driving: the three men inside the vehicle were all known as local firefighters; Yiyo was wearing his

official uniform; and they were transporting a female patient. By all appearances, it was an emergency, and the officers allowed the ambulance to continue its journey.

About six-hundred kilometers southwest of Iguazú, in the province of Corrientes, parked on the side of the road with emergency lights on, the rescue vehicle caught the attention of the highway patrol. Together with a group of gendarmes from Paso de los Libres, a town further east on the border with Brazil, they approached the ambulance to check whether its occupants needed help. Surprised by an unanticipated encounter with law enforcement, and noticeably nervous, the travelers gave evasive answers to the officers' questions. Gendarmes decided to conduct a search of the vehicle, enlisting a dog named Lucy, trained to detect drugs.¹ Hidden under false panels and inside the compartments they found 246 kilograms of marijuana and 4,000 ecstasy pills. Despite a scrambled explanation that they were on their way to attend a wildfire-training course all four occupants were detained.²

"An ex-firefighter, using a rescue vehicle, . . . an imported ambulance, which did not conform to traffic law regulations, simulated an emergency, and was detained upon reaching the jurisdiction of Paso de los Libres," summarized Ricardo Sánchez, the chief of the gendarmerie division in Iguazú.³ In an interview with a local news channel he also stated that the Thirteenth Squadron raided the homes of the three detained men "with positive results": in the residence belonging to the driver and his wife—the woman who pretended to be the patient—they found a packet of marijuana. Concluding the television interview Sánchez thanked residents for noticing the deception and for collaborating with the investigation. In the meantime, Javier Bareiro, the president of the volunteer firefighter commission, announced that although the ambulance carried its logos, the vehicle did not belong to the Iguazú fire department—it was the former chief's private property. He also made it clear that Moretti and his companions were no longer working as firefighters. Their credentials were *apócrifos* (false), he said. As this breaking news reached their town, Iguazúenses began publicly—and with unmasked resentment—talking about their former fire chief as *bombiero trucho* (fake firefighter). The local media called him a *narcobombiero* (narco firefighter).

The story of former firefighters using a counterfeit ambulance to perform a false emergency as a cover-up for trafficking drugs hinges on the idea of camouflage. Camouflage implies the use of one symbolic and material order to protect another from being recognized by blurring the boundaries between the two. In

this article I engage this concept to intervene in conversations of statecraft among anthropologists, building on analytical frameworks that illuminate the processual and performative qualities of political authority (Aretxaga 2005; Bobick 2014; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Joseph and Nugent 1994; Nugent 2004; Nelson 2009; Trouillot 2001). Rather than seeking to collapse the distinction between governmental authenticity and fakery (Bubandt 2009; Navaro-Yashin 2007; Reeves 2014), I argue that the logic of camouflage reveals how the state always already disguises the violence that it pretends to be separate from. In the tri-border area, where government agents play an ambiguous role in sanctioning operations of deception and facilitating illegal exchanges, the notion of camouflage helps explain how the contraband and corruption that pervade border relationships are inseparable from formal enactments of political authority. Camouflage thus helps to illuminate the aesthetic, pragmatic, and moral connections between statecraft and criminality, further enhancing our analytical purchase on how the law and its violation are symbiotically intertwined (e.g., Civico 2012; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Heyman and Smart 1999; Nordstrom 2007; Roitman 2004; van Schendel and Abraham 2005, Schneider and Schneider 2003).

When Moretti wore his old uniform and drove an ambulance that sought to be indistinguishable from other emergency vehicles run by the fire service, the former chief was simulating the state, even as he was undermining it, which, I suggest, is not much different from other—presumably genuine—acts of statecraft and law enforcement in the Triple Frontier. Social consensus built around protecting dirty secrets and public complicity in government practices known to be unlawful guarantee their effective concealment. State agents and non-state actors, appropriating the imagery of political authority to pursue illicit activities, frequently engage in practices of camouflage, constituting a legal-moral order that blurs the distinction between law and crime at the same time that it reinforces this difference as the foundation of statehood. In hiding the predatory and brutal under the just and peaceful, camouflage could be viewed as the *modus operandi* of statecraft, adding to our more general understanding of the performative character of politics and law. The narcobombero incident at least provides a glimpse into the political importance of operations of disguise at the borders of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, a region where I have been conducting ethnographic research since 2008.



Figure 1. Iguazú is the only place other than Buenos Aires where the Argentinean gendarmerie trains dogs in drug-detection. Photo by Ieva Jusionyte.

AMBIGUOUS HEROES

Iguazúenses expressed dismay that this drug-trafficking case involved former firefighters. In contrast to the local police—frequently accused of brutality and incompetence, known for beating suspects and denying them medical care—firefighters are typically praised as heroic, self-sacrificing civilians, the guardians of the community. In Argentina most firefighters are volunteers. Their vocation is articulated in terms of duty, and their dangerous work does not entitle them to monetary compensation. Indexing the nobility of their profession, an inscription in red on the wall of the Iguazú firehouse boldly asserts: “NADA NOS OBLIGA SOLO EL DOLOR DE LOS DEMAS” (nothing obliges us but the pain of others). History validates this dignified narrative. An all-volunteer Iguazú firefighter corps was established in 1982 and initially operated out of the private residence of its founder. The building that houses them now, strategically situated on the main thoroughfare, was originally constructed as the town’s first bus terminal and later served as a morgue, before it was turned over to the fire department. Inconveniences puncture the work of local firefighters here: every time it rains, the roof leaks, causing the firehouse to flood; volunteers wear pieces of donated bunker gear, rarely using full protective equipment; engines of old Mercedes fire trucks—much admired as antiquities by Europeans who stop by to

take pictures before or after visiting the Iguazú Falls, the major tourist attraction of the region—often fail and emergency vehicles need to be manually pushed onto the road in hopes of getting them to start. Despite these difficulties, when the siren goes off, firefighters faithfully respond to the call of duty, ready to risk their lives. Thus, when Yiyo and his companions used the disguise of the fire service to transport drugs, they were not imitating just any institution but one with a particularly positive status in the grassroots political imagination.



Figure 2. Puerto Iguazú Volunteer Fire Department: “Nothing obliges us but the pain of others.” Photo by Ieva Jusionyte

From the early days of my ethnographic fieldwork with news journalists in Puerto Iguazú (see Jusionyte 2013, 2014), I have visited the firehouse regularly. Press reporters I accompanied stopped there several times a week to inquire about emergency calls and rescue operations. Once I was invited to stay at the fire station overnight with a journalist documenting the around-the-clock routine of emergency workers. As the top fire official, Moretti was also in charge of the town’s civil defense coalition, and the media frequently interviewed him in preparation for and in the aftermath of severe rainstorms, floods, and draughts. In these emergency situations I saw Yiyo as a prominent public figure in the community. When the town’s water-supply system failed (a regular nuisance during long subtropical summers), he used a fire tanker to deliver water to people’s

homes and to restaurants. When storms hit, he toured the flooded neighborhoods to evacuate residents from their submerged dwellings and, once the rains stopped, took the initiative to cut down tree branches so they would not fall onto people's houses. Yiyo was a native Iguazúense who blended his official role as an agent of the state with his informal networks of patronage. Despite accusations of clientelism raised against him, Iguazúenses were generally grateful to their fire chief for help in times of need. One journalist who interviewed Moretti frequently on the news beat said to me after his arrest: "He was a good firefighter. He helped people. There's no doubt about that. But he had to protect his investiture. He had to be the fire chief both inside and outside of the firehouse." The comment hints at the difficulty Yiyo faced maintaining a firm boundary between his public office and his private affairs.

Fire departments form integral parts of governmental systems of emergency response, but they hold a liminal position vis-à-vis both the state and the community. They often blur the lines between the civilian and the military, between paid work and voluntary service. Associated with sacrifice and victimhood, firefighters occupy a specific cultural niche, providing a powerful semiotic tool for thinking through paradoxes: they are "rescuer-victims, citizen-soldiers, inside-outsiders, sentimental-officials, masculine men who cry, and more" (Rothenbuhler 2005, 186). Because of their liminal qualities, firefighters have been incorporated into the mythopolitics of the modern state, a process through which societies create mythic heroes as models for action and portray the "imagined behavior of these heroes as reflections of desired qualities considered useful in future actions against those who threaten the state" (Donahue 2011, 6). This highly mediated phenomenon proves especially popular in the United States, but it extends to fire departments across Latin America, where local communities generally hold firefighters in high regard. Everywhere, however, they are glorified as sacrificial victims, seen as both part of the state and apart from it, as uniformed civil servants and as citizen volunteers—an ambiguity that is never fully resolved.

Firefighters are also frontline street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980) who, like law-enforcement officers, customs agents, and social workers, in the day-to-day performance of public service deal with contradictions between the formal rules and the pragmatics of governance and who negotiate their legal mandates against ethical and cultural values (see, e.g., Chalfin 2010; Fassin 2013; Herzfeld 1992, 1997; Heyman 2000, 2002; Jauregui 2013). But in Iguazú firefighters are also intricately connected to other private and public interests. All volunteers have other jobs to pay their bills: some fix domestic appliances, others work in

construction, drive cabs and tourist buses, bake bread, or are employed as body guards; one is a chef at a luxury hotel. The impossibility of distinguishing between their multiple positions and of drawing a boundary between their public service and private practice has fueled people's mistrust of higher-ranking officials in the fire department. Living in Iguazú, I repeatedly heard residents accuse several senior personnel of using the firehouse as a means to appropriate public resources or to cover up illegal exchanges associated with the extensive informal economy on the border.

As the narcobombero incident unraveled, more people began speaking up publicly about their long-held suspicions of the former chief's involvement in shady dealings. After he resigned from his position at the Iguazú fire department in 2011, Moretti continued to perform activities that resembled his earlier duties. For example, he bought a fire truck and used it for cutting tree branches and doing other odd jobs. Yiyó told me that he had distanced himself from the firehouse and wanted to operate an alternative—private—emergency service. He even asked for my help in checking the prices for importing used rescue vehicles from the United States. When he purchased an American-style ambulance and began driving it back and forth across the border to Paraguay, the town's residents were further puzzled by his behavior. Almost a year after Moretti was arrested and as he was serving his prison sentence in Buenos Aires, I asked a journalist friend of mine why the press did not investigate widespread rumors of Yiyó's involvement in drug trafficking, to which she replied: "Everyone was talking about it, but there was no proof."

I took part in the activities of the Iguazú fire department under Moretti's command as a volunteer and a filmmaker. Toward the end of my ethnographic research on the news media, I suggested to the fire chief that I could make a documentary film, showing the everyday reality of firefighters working under precarious conditions in an underfinanced and underequipped firehouse.⁴ Moretti enthusiastically approved of this idea, hoping that it would attract donations from better-financed fire departments in Europe and in the United States. For several months in late 2010 and early 2011 I spent many days and nights filming in the firehouse and accompanying firefighters on emergency calls. But at times I had to shut the camera off. Everybody played a certain game of hide-and-seek: volunteers were hired and fired at the chief's mercy; equipment and money mysteriously disappeared; and continuous disagreements between the fire chief and the president of the volunteer firefighter commission, Juan Carlos di Dio, who was responsible for overseeing the department's bank accounts, resulted in locked doors

and suspensions, spreading mistrust among the service members. As the conflict between Moretti and di Dio escalated, my presence with the camera became an obvious liability, and I was forced to stop filming earlier than planned. Given the multiple layers of secrecy and concealment that I observed while working on the documentary, the narcobombero incident in 2013, more than two years later, seemed nothing more than a spectacular exposure of the camouflage routine in the everyday practices of the fire department and other state institutions in Iguazú.

The narcobombero episode is important not because it shows how in this region, where organized crime has effectively penetrated many government agencies, the fire department, too, was co-opted by drug traffickers. It poses a much more complicated question: How can we analytically distinguish between forging the appearance of the state to commit a crime and committing a crime during the authorized performance of state functions? What would this distinction explain about statecraft in the Triple Frontier? By the time the former fire chief was caught, he had successfully crossed the border and passed several checkpoints on the highway. It is a public secret that security forces in the tri-border area are implicated in networks of patronage and corruption that permit contraband and trafficking. But what happens when a gendarme, a prefect, or a customs agent takes a bribe from smugglers or from drug traffickers, or when a migrations officer participates in human trafficking? Are they subverting or counterfeiting the rule of law? Personnel serving in the security forces embody what [Max Weber \(2004\)](#) defines as the state's quintessential feature: the claim to the legitimate monopoly of violence within a given territory. Their uniform, right to arrest, and the permitted use of lethal force all mark them as agents of the law. Yet by allowing illegal flows to proceed, they routinely, if more invisibly, contravene legal norms. Unlike in the state of exception ([Agamben 2005](#); [Schmitt 1985](#)), these transgressions are not publicly justified by the state's sovereign power to establish the boundary between law and crime; instead, they are carefully disguised within the daily performances of its functions. "Impersonating the state," writes [Madeleine Reeves \(2014, 14–15\)](#), wavers between enacting the state's authority and mimicking its effects, which—depending on the situation—can be either seen as corruption or as socially legitimate lawbreaking activities. As I discuss below, corrupt officials on Argentina's borders with Brazil and Paraguay, rather than transgressing and thus subverting the moral-legal order, embody the *raison d'être* of the camouflage state.

PERFORMATIVE STATECRAFT

Camouflage refers to technologies of concealment that a military applies to impede the identification of its personnel, equipment, and installations based on the principles of blending into the background and the disruption of outlines. The term was officially introduced in the military context of World War I, but the French police of the late nineteenth century already used to *camoufler* (disguise) themselves to apprehend criminals (King 2014, 403). As a cultural practice, camouflage requires local knowledge and performative competence to achieve its effects. In the quotidian life of the state, violence, which is intrinsic to its formation and operation, is hidden under the cover of moral-legal order by blurring the practical distinction between these formally separate dimensions of governing.

The argument about camouflage that I develop in this article owes important insights to scholarship on the fictional nature of the state. Echoing A. R. Radcliffe-Brown's idea that the state does not exist, Philip Abrams (1988, 82) calls it "the opium of the citizen" and "the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is." For Abrams (1988, 76, 77), the state is "first and foremost an exercise in legitimation" and "a triumph of concealment." Recognition of the state's illusoriness and duplicity (Nelson 2009), its magical modality (Das 2004) and spectral forms (Daniel M. Goldstein 2012), however, does not obliterate the reality of its social effects. Rather than simply being fictitious, statecraft is a performative process with material consequences. The appearance of its substance is, as Judith Butler (1988, 520) put it, "a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief." To remain compelling, the illusion of the state must be bound by social sanction and taboo, which work to conceal its performative aspect. Discussing the fetish power of the modern state, Michael Taussig (1992, 132–33) suggests that the secret takes on the burden of protecting "the epistemology of appearance and reality in which appearance is thought to shroud a concealed truth—but not the truth that there is none." Statecraft becomes contingent on the maintenance of such dirty secrets. The combination of statecraft's magical qualities with the murkiness and ambiguity of its everyday rational-bureaucratic modalities (Das 2004) allows us to talk about the state's camouflaged makeup.

Building on the disemic opposition between the formal and the intimate, the official and the vernacular (Herzfeld 1992, 1997), anthropologists have also shown how everyday practices of government bureaucracies are negotiated against the state's ideal form (e.g., Feldman 2008; Gupta 1995, 2012; Hetherington

2011; Hull 2012). Counterintuitively, by perpetual reference to the state code, transgressions make the official form both intelligible and relevant. Grappling with the question of state legitimacy in the face of forgeries, corruption within its own procedures, and the mimesis of its structures, Veena Das (2004, 245) writes that this “iterability” of state practices for illegitimate purposes “becomes not a sign of vulnerability but a mode of circulation through which power is produced.” Puzzled by how letters widely believed to be forged instigated violence in Indonesia, Nils Bubandt (2009, 561) argues that they were written and read against the background of “distrust of official forms of veracity and a deep sense that the state forms of authority . . . may themselves be counterfeit.” The multiplication of fake documents points to the “fundamental opacity of state authority” (Bubandt 2009, 575). Even when deception is suspected and detected, the state is still authoritative enough to have real social consequences. To overcome the futile opposition between the authentic and the fake in the political reality of the state, Michael Bobick (2014, 7) employs the concept of “performative sovereignty” to show how, despite their tenuous claims to statehood, contested post-Soviet territories of Eastern Europe act as if they were states. The *de facto* form of sovereignty has proven an enduring means of separatist governance.

The notion of camouflage draws from these processual and performative approaches and elaborates on them to interrogate the relationship between statecraft and criminality. Rephrasing Charles Tilly’s (1985, 169) important observation that states are “quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy,” Dennis Rodgers (2006, 326) suggests their ontological equivalence to gangs. His provocative idea finds support in a series of ethnographic studies that document how organized crime is intricately connected to the operation of states (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Heyman and Smart 1999; Nordstrom 2007, Roitman 2004; van Schendel and Abraham 2005; Schneider and Schneider 2003). These studies acknowledge hybrid forms of governance wherein state bureaucracies and criminal organizations compete and even overlap in their claims for sovereignty (Bobick 2011; Civico 2012; Jaffe 2013; Pansters 2012; Penglase 2009). Challenging state-centric views, according to which legal society and criminal networks are opposites, they pursue the outlaw into zones where, as Carolyn Nordstrom (2007, 145) writes, “legality bleeds into illegality” and “illegality enters mainstream society.” In this context, the notion of camouflage enables us to explain the symbolic, material, and performative mechanisms that combine in providing legitimacy to a state’s coercive practices, perhaps especially in a border

region like the Triple Frontier with deep legacies of clientelist politics and contestations over power and authority.

In statecraft, law and crime constitute the two sides of the Möbius strip—they appear to be separate even as they exist on a twisted continuum. As [John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff \(2006, 5\)](#) argue, criminal violence does not repudiate the rule of law and market operations but “appropriate[s] their forms—and recommission[s] their substance,” that is, “violent crime increasingly counterfeits government.” The story of the former fire chief caught driving an ambulance loaded with drugs is but an episode among many where outlaws falsify state signature to assume spotless legibility and protect themselves from discovery by becoming invisible under the veil of the law. It is a story of a counterfeit emergency, where the impersonation of the state was used as a disguise for crime. But perhaps the more troubling idea, worthy of further exploration, is that the state, both targeted by and engaged in counterfeiting, is always already based on camouflaged forms and practices. There would then be no difference between counterfeit state insignias and their presumed originals as both allow for the blending of il/legal and il/licit, the official and backstage realities of governance. [Comaroff and Comaroff \(2006, 15\)](#) note that the fetish and the fake eventually fade into each other. Here I am making a similar argument by suggesting that in the Triple Frontier, camouflage, as the two-way mimesis between legal and criminal forms, constitutes the operative principle of statecraft.

ENFORCEMENT AND CORRUPTION

Global security discourse, circulated through governmental reports and media narratives, usually portrays the border region between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay as a haven for organized crime, where corrupt law-enforcement agencies fail to prevent flows of illegalized goods across the borders ([Hudson 2003](#); [Shelley and Picarelli 2005](#); [Sverdlick 2005](#)). Contraband in everyday and luxury commodities, from cigarettes to electronics, from guns to perfume, began in earnest in the mid-twentieth century, when General Alfredo Stroessner founded Ciudad del Este as Paraguay’s outpost for state-sanctioned smuggling to Brazil and Argentina, facilitated by the country’s significantly lower tax rates and inconsistent migration and customs control on its borders ([Lewis 2006](#)). Yet neither the large market of counterfeit commodities in Ciudad del Este, where you can find anything from pirated DVDs to forged passports, nor widespread contraband precipitated the recent securitization and militarization of the Triple Frontier. The lens of the global security apparatus began to zoom in on the area only during

the 1990s, in the wake of two terrorist attacks against Israeli institutions in Buenos Aires, which were traced back to the allegedly porous borders (Greenberg 2010). After 9/11, strengthened border control and intensified surveillance became integral components of the U.S.-led war on terror, and the Triple Frontier became one of its fronts. Security measures in the region were justified by the need to curb terrorist financing, purportedly entangled with the Triple Frontier's pervasive drug-trafficking and money-laundering economy.



Figure 3. Parade in Iguazú to mark the two-hundred-year anniversary of the founding of the naval prefecture, June 2010. Photo by Ieva Jusionyte

Before recent global efforts to securitize and militarize the Triple Frontier began, the Argentine government had already dispatched a full array of security forces to the northern border. Parallel to the system of local policing there exists an extensive network of federal agencies. In Iguazú the security apparatus comprises the Naval Prefecture, the National Gendarmerie, the Federal Police, the Airport Security Police, and the Ninth Mountain Infantry Regiment of the Twelfth Jungle Brigade of the Argentine Army. Three of these institutions—the gendarmerie, the prefecture, and federal police—have overlapping jurisdictions over federal crimes. In an interview I conducted in 2009, the commander of the Thirteenth Squadron, General Edgardo Riva, said that the most important federal crimes in and around Iguazú were drug and human trafficking. While common

crimes “only affect people,” the commander explained, federal crimes “are crimes that affect the nation-state.” According to the general, the country’s geographical proximity to Paraguay facilitated trafficking in northeastern Argentina; other Argentine security officials I spoke to equally blamed the other country’s nearness for contraband, counterfeiting, and money laundering.

Paraguay is the major producer of marijuana in South America, and its 367-kilometer border with Misiones makes the latter province one of the key access points through which the illicit commodity reaches regional and international markets. According to the *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, most of Argentina’s marijuana seizures occur in the Triple Frontier.⁵ But border officials and journalists in the region acknowledge that law enforcement captures only a small fraction of what gets across. Traffickers rely on creative disguise to smuggle prohibited merchandise from one country to another. In northern Paraguay, drugs are frequently wrapped in watertight bags and floated down the Paraná toward Argentine urban centers in Rosario and Buenos Aires. In other instances, as the incident with the fake ambulance indicates, marijuana is hidden in vehicles and delivered across the border through official checkpoints. In fact, Moretti is not the only narcobombero in the Triple Frontier: a year after Yiyo’s arrest, the chief of another volunteer fire department in Misiones was detained on the international bridge connecting the provincial capital of Misiones, Posadas, with the Paraguayan river port of Encarnación with 150 kilos of marijuana hidden in his van. In search of new routes out of the highly policed continent, traffickers also use Argentina to transport cocaine: in trucks, disguised within other goods and hidden in secret compartments; by planes, which land on clandestine airstrips; or by people, known as “mules,” who tuck them into their luggage, tape them under their clothes, or swallow and carry them inside their stomachs.

Iguazúenses know that law-enforcement and government regulatory agencies on the border play a part in facilitating smuggling. Mostly through word of mouth and occasionally from personal experience, my acquaintances knew who needed to be bribed to bring air-conditioning units or spare vehicle parts that exceeded the quota for foreign purchases into the country. It was a public secret that some employees in the customs office enabled their family members, business associates, or those who agreed to pay bribes to sidestep border trade regulations. As such, it was not easy to distinguish *illegalized yet socially legitimate* practices, such as small-scale contraband for personal consumption, and *unlawful illicit* flows, like drug trafficking (see [Jusionyte 2013](#)). But it was even harder to estimate to what

extent the outlawed activities intertwined with formal state institutions and practices.

This intermingling of il/legalized activities explains what I initially found to be a frustrating end point during ethnographic interviews. Since I began research in Iguazú in 2008, residents have shown hostility to the discourse of lawlessness on the alleged *frontera caliente* (hot border) perpetuated in the mainstream media. They often repeated an almost formulaic answer: their town was a safe place because “all security forces were present.” I heard this from taxi drivers, media reporters, municipal employees, and others who had stakes in protecting the regional tourism economy centered on the Iguazú Falls against criminalizing narratives of the violent border. It was not until some years later, when people trusted me and more readily shared silent local knowledge, that I encountered a different version of this repetitive utterance: “If all the security forces are here, how come there is drug trafficking? How come there is contraband?” The answer was supposed to be obvious: corruption.⁶ Corruption is characterized by an ambivalent dialectics of concealment and publicity and hidden continuities between the legal and the illegal (Nuijten and Anders 2007). This dual emphasis on legality/illegality and visibility/invisibility proves central to the camouflage state, where crime, as transgression, is always already implicit in the legal-moral order, even as it is creatively disguised. In Iguazú, the presence of multiple federal agencies not only failed at preventing organized crime but contributed to its boom. In his book *La frontera: Viaje al misterioso triangulo de Brasil, Argentina y Paraguay*—which some locals despise as a collection of unfounded allegations, with others confirming the veracity of its account—the investigative journalist Hernán Lopez Echagüe (1997) described how in the 1990s officers in the gendarmerie and prefecture fiercely competed for business with local traffickers, each agency trying to offer a better deal for a “blind check” on the bridge or at the river port, facilitating arms and drugs contraband. Despite biannual rotations of personnel in the security forces and redrawn jurisdictions between the agencies, by the early 2000s, long-established networks and practices of corruption and clientelism remained largely intact.

In 2013, on Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index (CPI), Argentina scored 34, and Paraguay 24; CPI scores range from 0 to 100, and the lower the value, the higher the corruption. Thus both countries ranked relatively low.⁷ According to Sally Engle Merry and Susan B. Coutin (2014, 8), measurement systems such as the CPI constitute political technologies, inscribed by the values of those able to use them. Yet everyday talk of corruption likewise

abounds among the residents in the Triple Frontier. According to Mariana, a journalist who works for a Paraguayan daily in Ciudad del Este, “corruption is everywhere.” Using the same vocabulary adopted by the global apparatus of anticorruption, she calls it “a social ill, a cancer.” Mariana remembers going to interview a police captain, who mistook her for somebody else coming to collect a bribe. When she inquired about this misunderstanding, the captain showed her a print document with a list of journalists’ names and amounts of money the police paid them weekly. The evident normalcy of the situation disturbed Mariana. The public visibility of corruption in Ciudad del Este appeared striking to her.

In contrast, on the Argentine side of the border, corrupt practices are carefully hidden from public sight. Appearances still matter there. Corruption is ingrained in structures of clientelism and supported by what one municipal employee defined as “a sense of impunity.” Iguazúenses complain that the police and other government agencies do not take responsibility for crime. “What can you do if you were robbed? Cry for a while, maybe. Then build again, buy again,” a young mother explained to me. On a larger scale, the convergence between corruption and clientelism in Argentina is often traced to the neoliberal government of Carlos Menem in the 1990s. Menem was charged with smuggling weapons to Ecuador and Croatia, but the legacies of his rule have far transcended this singular high-profile case. Menem’s neoliberal reforms precipitated the economic crisis of 2001 and contributed to the pauperization of the middle-class, making many Argentines see their everyday lives in terms of uncertainty. Anxiety became a dominant sentiment in the media and among its publics, concerned with the failures of democracy and globalization, and overcome by the feeling of insecurity (Seri 2012). In popular imaginaries, violent crime traditionally characterized the lower classes, while corruption—*crimen de guantes blancos* (crime of the white gloves), as Iguazúenses refer to it, or white-collar crime—was seen as a vice of the better-off. The restructuring of Argentina’s economy and its subsequent collapse in the early 2000s, however, not only caused an upsurge in crime but a blurring of the edges of legal and illegal activities, erasing earlier class-based distinctions and exposing the previously unacknowledged links between drug trafficking and government corruption (see Donna Goldstein 2012).

PUBLIC SECRETS

“The border creates opportunity. There are many people who have lived for years from engaging in activities that are far from innocent. The community didn’t condemn them,” a government employee in Iguazú told me in an interview

in early 2014. The border offers an important stage for the performance of the state, and, not by coincidence, also a space where law more visibly blends with forms of illegality. Josiah Heyman and Howard Campbell (2007, 202) note that “border culture contains significant symbolic codes and relational frameworks for melding opposites, for making ‘arrangements,’ for getting things done, for tolerating incongruities, and for pretending not to know about all of this in public.” The indeterminate character of borders, as the literal margins and spaces of creativity, enables us to better understand the state itself (Das and Poole 2004). Rather than merely providing a descriptive portrait of crime in the tri-border region, my ethnographic investigation of practices and discourses on the edges of law and order in the Triple Frontier addresses the camouflage mechanisms of Argentine statecraft more generally.

Moretti and his companions used the camouflage of a counterfeit emergency vehicle to blend in with the formal state institution. It was a double crime: using one symbolic form, a falsified legal-moral order, to hide another, the transgression of the law. Why did it work? Even though rumors of the former fire chief’s involvement in illegal activities had circulated in Iguazú for years, the same vows of public secrecy in the community protected Moretti that prohibit speaking about corrupt security forces and regulatory agencies on the border. A public secret means knowing what not to know, where not to look, what not to see (Taussig 1999, 50). In Iguazú, public secrets are justified and maintained by interdependent moral and pragmatic codes of *connivencia* (complicity) and *convivencia* (coexistence). Not by chance is the Spanish word *connivencia* close to a popular Iguazúense concept *convivencia*, translated into English as “coexistence” or “collaboration” and invoking the spirit of getting along. Whereas *complicity* has negative undertones because it constricts agency and implicates residents in the games of hide-and-seek with the town’s corrupt authorities, *convivencia*, which has the same effect of withholding some information from public circulation, is positive—it offers a form of protection. Complicity may be forced on border residents as an informal system of control; but through *convivencia*, they internalize it as accountability to their community. As unspoken rules of living together on the margins of the state, these codes explain why certain issues, even when people recognize them as problematic, are not openly discussed. “There is a direct relationship among the people because everybody knows each other’s story,” said one journalist. Another reporter explained it this way: “Everybody knows. Nobody says anything. Nobody wants to get involved. That’s because it has always been: ‘yo hago lo mío y usted haga lo suyo’ [I do what’s mine, and you do what’s yours].”

The following example illustrates the tight relationship between *convivencia*, complicity, and public secrecy in Iguazú. When in the beginning of 2014 inflation in Argentina was steadily rising (since banks had only limited amounts of U.S. dollars and Brazilian reals) people commonly sidestepped the law to purchase foreign currency. A journalist told me how she went to a centrally located *casa de cambio* (currency exchange) in Iguazú to buy Brazilian reals. When she approached the window, the manager—who had just told a disappointed tourist that there were no reals available—offered to sell her foreign currency informally, for which the journalist had to pay the inflated black market rate. “The person at the *casa de cambio* sold me *en forma trucha* [deceitfully], and I accepted it, so I am an accomplice in this. As a journalist, I should report this *acto corrupto* [corrupt act]. But I didn’t. Why not? Because I needed the reals. What right or authority do I have to denounce the act if I am buying illegally?” The journalist said that complicity was inseparable from *convivencia* in Iguazú. “There is complicity in many situations. For example, if I see a traffic inspector without a helmet or without lights, I don’t say anything. I don’t want them to denounce me for something that I do because I may also be wrong sometimes.”

As an analytic category, camouflage transcends the local scenario of the Triple Frontier. The aesthetic form, the pragmatic function, and the legal-moral regime of disguise constitute, as I have discussed, essential components of statecraft at large. Yet its concrete manifestations are embedded in communities, where they are also more accessible to ethnographic observation. Neighbors are better able to recognize the subtle flaws in the performance of camouflage. Iguazúenses were suspicious about Moretti driving back and forth to Paraguay in an ambulance decorated with the logos of the fire service, to which, they knew, he no longer belonged. His activities attracted less attention outside of Iguazú, where the appearance of the ambulance and the embodied performance of the driver served as indicators of authenticity. An unfamiliar public will unlikely notice small flaws. But when outsiders recognize camouflage, they also more easily expose it. In contrast, in a small border town the codes of *convivencia* and complicity extend protection to those engaged in trafficking, contraband, or corruption, so that much sensitive and potentially incriminating information remains a public secret.

During my last visit to the field in March 2014, I met a friend who worked for the government to discuss recent scandals of corruption and organized crime—by then Moretti’s incident had been overshadowed by the high-profile case of Carlos Ojeda, the chief of investigations of the regional police, accused

of taking bribes from a group of drug dealers and robbers in exchange for offering them protection. He said, “There are always some people involved in this. You learn about them when the news comes out in the papers. Otherwise, they are our neighbors. We don’t know anything until we learn the news from the papers.” He compared Moretti and Ojeda to two branches cut from the same tree, a tree whose other branches continue to grow. Public secrecy is a powerful form of social knowledge that allows camouflage to work. In a tightly knit community, the recognition of fraud might be easier, yet it is less likely to be exposed through defacement. On the national scale, where intimacy is less constrictive, there is also less familiarity. It was no coincidence, then, that when Moretti’s disguise was recognized hundreds of kilometers away from home, it was by his fellow firefighters from Iguazú.

Almost one year after the narcobombero incident, a firefighter told me privately the part of the story that the media had not reported. On that fateful day of Moretti’s arrest, two members of the fire department were driving from Córdoba back to Iguazú in a newly acquired fire truck and ran into their former chief, traveling in the opposite direction. After this surprise encounter, the two firefighters alerted the gendarmerie that, despite appearances, the man and the vehicle had nothing to do with the Iguazú fire department. Gendarmes in Corrientes raided Moretti’s fake ambulance while he was parked near the sanctuary in Mercedes dedicated to a popular Argentine folk saint, Gauchito Gil. A regional version of Robin Hood, Gauchito was a nineteenth-century bandit who helped those in need by stealing from the rich to give to the poor, until one day the military forces caught and executed him. Though skeptics refer to the folk saint as proof that Argentines idolize the figure of the outlaw, Gauchito Gil remains highly popular, with numerous shrines with red ribbons dedicated to him on roadsides throughout the country. In an ironic conclusion to the story, when law-enforcement officers approached the ambulance parked off the road near the sanctuary dedicated to the bandit-turned-saint, they discovered a firefighter-turned-trafficker imitating his former self.

(UN)COVERED REFRACTIONS

Why is camouflage as a modality of statecraft important ethnographically and analytically? In this article I have shown that gendarmes and customs officers use the camouflage of authority to help smugglers, imitating their own role as law enforcement, while traffickers impersonating firefighters fabricate the veil of the legal state as a disguise for illegitimate profit. In both situations the operations

of state and crime become so intertwined that they are practically inseparable. The state is both *deceived by* and *used as* camouflage. It is both subverted and upheld by forms of concealment that proliferate in response to its presence. If the state is “a set of practices and processes and their effects” (Trouillot 2001, 131), to uncover what lies beneath its camouflage appears not only a futile but also a misguided effort. Its criminal and legal forms are deeply entangled. In the Argentine northeast, camouflage is the *modus operandi* of statecraft—its aesthetic form, performative practice, and moral-legal order. In the two scenarios examined here—wearing the mask of law to cover up crime and engaging in crime from a position authorized by law—investigating how state authority supplies the cover for its own deception has proved a constructive way of understanding the state’s processual and performative nature.

In the tri-border area we can see what Begoña Aretxaga (2005, 258) calls “an excess of statehood practices: too many actors competing to perform as state.” Some of these processes—the former firefighters using a counterfeit emergency vehicle to traffic drugs—are discovered to be camouflage for other forms of illegalized exchange. Other state practices are formally authorized as genuine but are equally deceptive: the prefecture, gendarmerie, and customs officials, among others responsible for law enforcement on the border, facilitating and covering up contraband. Camouflage blurs the arbitrary yet consequential boundary between state and crime. More specifically, this notion enables us to examine how actors other than formal institutions participate in the performance of political authority by assuming its appearance: they deceive the state by indistinguishably blending with it. Thus, although in my analysis the camouflage state is deeply grounded in the social and historical context of the Triple Frontier, the relevance of this conceptual framework transcends this geographic and historical region.

My case is reminiscent, for example, of political, economic, and social assemblages that arise through the merger of organized crime and legal order in post-Soviet Eastern Europe (Bobick 2011) and in Central Asia (Reeves 2014), where the state is impersonated and performed without assuming that it is coterminous with the domain of the licit. It also echoes the shifting political and economic topographies of neoliberal sovereignty accompanying resource extraction throughout the African continent (Chalfin 2010; Ferguson 2006), as well as other infelicitous configurations of il/legality and dis/order in the centers and in the periphery of global powers, where capitalist markets thrive on maintaining degrees of lawlessness (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006).

Camouflage helps us understand why the intricate links between the state and illegalized practices can so often hide in plain sight. The story of the narco-bombero as told against the background of corruption on the border reveals that state effects are created by endless refractions, which do more than blur the distinction between law and crime, between the deceived and the deceiving, between the original and the counterfeit. As Taussig (1993, 47–48) writes about magical practice, here, too, “the representation shares in or acquires the properties of the represented.” Camouflage does not merely blend the predictable dichotomous categories by which we approach and analyze the performance of the state, but I would argue that by obfuscating any clear distinction between the legal, the political, and the criminal, it actually enables states to happen.

ABSTRACT

Focusing on a story of former firefighters who used a counterfeit rescue vehicle to perform a false emergency as a cover-up for drug trafficking in the tri-border area of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, this article engages the concept of camouflage to intervene in anthropological discussions on statecraft. The article explores how drug traffickers—but also gendarmes, prefects, and customs officers, who help smugglers by accepting bribes—use the camouflage of legitimate political authority to enable illicit transactions. In the tri-border area, the notion of camouflage helps explain how the contraband and corruption that pervade border relationships are inseparable from formal enactments of political authority. Camouflage, thus, helps illuminate the aesthetic, pragmatic, and moral connections between statecraft and criminality, further enhancing our analytical purchase on how the law and its violation are symbiotically intertwined. I argue that this study of corruption on the border reveals that state effects are created by endless refractions, which do more than blur the distinction between law and crime, between the deceived and the deceiving, between the original and the counterfeit. Camouflage does not merely blend the predictable dichotomous categories by which we approach and analyze the performance of the state, but by obfuscating any clear distinction between the legal, the political, and the criminal, it actually enables states to happen. [state; crime; contraband; drug trafficking; corruption; border; camouflage]

NOTES

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1. "Ex bombero voluntario detenido en Corrientes con 300 kilos de marihuana" [Volunteer firefighter arrested in Corrientes with 300 kilograms of marijuana], Radio Cataratas, April 30, 2013.
2. "Narcobombero: 'No sabía lo que transportaba'" [Narco firefighter: 'I didn't know what I was transporting'], *La Voz de Cataratas*, May 6, 2013.
3. "Gendarmería Nacional incauto droga en la casa del ex bombero" [National gendarmerie found drugs in the house of former firefighter], CVI Noticias, May 7, 2013. Video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEfizjWlykM>.
4. Ieva Jusionyte, *Bomberos* [Firefighters], documentary film, 2011, 51 min.
5. The *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (INCSR) is annually published by the U.S. Department of State. It is available at <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2012/index.htm>. Scholars have criticized it for inaccuracies and a politicized agenda.
6. With a few notable exceptions (Gupta 1995; Smart 1993), corruption became an issue of interest to anthropologists fairly recently (e.g., Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006; Haller and Shore 2005; Hasty 2005; Nuijten and Anders 2007; Reeves 2014; Schneider and Schneider 2003; Smith 2007). Rather than treating it normatively and considering it as a vice afflicting the body politic, these and other scholars used ethnographic evidence to show that corruption was in fact constitutive of legal order.
7. The Corruption Perceptions Index ranks countries based on how corrupt a country's public sector is perceived to be. It is a composite index, drawing on corruption-related data from expert and business surveys carried out by a variety of independent institutions. Data available at <http://www.transparency.org/country>.

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